

# *Handling Conflict with Your Teenager*

## **Overview**

Tips on resolving conflicts with your teenager.

- Choosing your battles
- Hot buttons and how to avoid them
- Saying you're sorry
- Kind words and compliments
- When conflict isn't healthy

No matter how comfortable or healthy your relationship with your teenager is, you're bound to have conflicts from time to time. A certain degree of conflict in a relationship is not only normal, it's actually healthy. It requires us to express our feelings instead of hiding them. Conflict forces us to recognize our differences and our beliefs, and to acknowledge that there are other ways of seeing things.

Taking the time to resolve a conflict -- especially within a family -- can help us become more understanding and respectful of each other. If you and your teenager persevere and resolve a conflict, it can help both of you understand the power of finding solutions rather than giving in or giving up.

Fortunately, research shows that conflict between parents and teenagers isn't constant and doesn't last forever. Most teenagers go through one particularly difficult phase at some point, and this phase ordinarily lasts from two to five months.

## **Choosing your battles**

Like many parents, you may find that arguments over what seem like small issues -- your teenager's clothes and appearance, or what time he starts his homework -- can easily flare into heated conflicts. Most experts agree that it's best to save your parental authority for larger issues of health and safety -- such as sex, drug and alcohol use, and safe driving -- and not to waste battles on issues of taste, fashion, or appearances. It is in these areas of smaller concern that teenagers can most safely learn from making mistakes, and from living with the consequences of their decisions.

A helpful way of deciding whether an issue is worth arguing about is by asking yourself, "Will anything serious happen if I don't step in?" If the answer is, "No," then it's probably better to stay out of it and let your teenager have the experience of making her own decision and living with the results. It may be hard to see your daughter start off on a freezing morning with her light jacket, but remember, she may make a better decision the next time if she's had the experience of feeling cold this time.

As for the larger issues -- where your teenager's health and safety are clearly and significantly at stake -- be sure to set firm, clear limits. Then tell your teenager what the consequences will be for a violation of the limits, and enforce them consistently.

### **Hot buttons and how to avoid them**

There are certain ways of talking with teenagers that are likely to heighten conflict. Sometimes they are so habitual that we no longer realize that we're using them. To avoid heated discussions, try to remember these guidelines:

- *Avoid nagging.* If you ask your teenager over and over to do something, you are nagging. This seldom produces anything but conflict. Before you give in to the impulse to nag, ask yourself, "Is what I'm asking important?" "Is there a better time to talk about this?" "Have I said this 50 times before?"
- *Avoid accusing and judging.* Teenagers feel judged in so many areas of their lives that it's important to restrain yourself from judging them at home. Statements like, "That was such a dumb thing for you to do" or "You're so lazy" only lead to further argument and leave your teenager feeling alienated.
- *Don't embarrass or ridicule your teenager.* Making fun of your teenager's opinions, achievements, or appearance is unkind and will leave him feeling hurt and defensive.
- *Stay calm.* Remember that how you deal with stress serves as a model for your teenager. If you think you are going to lose your temper, leave the room and cool down.
- *Think of things you appreciate and love about your teenager.* If a conversation gets heated, try thinking for a moment about those things.
- *Refrain from getting in the last word.* To avoid prolonged battles, resist getting in the last word, no matter how tempting it may be. It can turn a simple disagreement into a lengthy standoff.

### **Saying you're sorry**

Don't be afraid to apologize to your teenager for your behavior. An apology shows strength, not weakness. You can say, "I'm sorry. When I yelled at you for coming in late I said some things I shouldn't have." When you say you're sorry, you take responsibility for your behavior. And taking responsibility for your behavior allows your teenager to take responsibility for his.

### **Kind words and compliments**

If you're like most parents, you've probably taken the time to let your teenager know about the things he does that annoy you. Maybe it's the way your son forgets to turn off the lights in the bathroom, or how he drops his clothes all

over the house, or how your daughter leaves dirty dishes all over her room. But how often do you tell your teenager about the things she does that make you feel proud?

Look for opportunities to praise your teenager. When your teenager takes the time to help her brother with math, or takes care in picking out a gift for someone else, let her know that you notice and appreciate what she does. Or when your teenager runs a load of laundry without being asked to, or helps the old man across the street carry in his groceries, let him know that you notice. Try to find at least one thing a day to appreciate in your teenager -- and show your appreciation with kind words and compliments. Teenagers doubt themselves all the time and in so many ways. They need your words of appreciation.

Taking time for kind words and compliments pulls us out of critical ways of thinking. It gives us -- and our teenagers -- pleasure. When we notice and remark on our teenagers' strengths it gives them a platform of confidence and self-esteem that can help them recognize and deal with their weaknesses on their own. When we take the time to show our pride and support, it infuses our teenagers with the confidence and resilience to withstand stress and adversity. And it provides them with a model for treating others that will help them build satisfying, healthy relationships -- inside and outside of school, now and in the future.

### **When conflict isn't healthy**

Family conflict isn't healthy if

- it is constant
- it usually or often goes unresolved
- it takes the form of physical or emotional abuse

If this describes the fighting in your family -- if you feel that it's reached a point where you can't stop it -- it's important to get assistance from an expert who can help you understand how to stop it. This could be a trusted friend, another family member, a religious counselor, or a professional counselor. If the fighting involves physical or emotional abuse, it's important to seek professional help right away.